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Geneva recess

NO one can possibly foresee today what may or may not lie down the end of the road that leads from Geneva.

When great superpowers such as the United States and the Soviet Union begin to talk as Messrs. Shultz and Gromyko began talking yesterday and today, the result can be mere sparring for propaganda advantage, or the beginning of a new attempt to find a formula to channel and regulate their future relations within safety railings.

The first détente, which former President Richard Nixon launched in 1972, attempted to do just that, and it failed. It failed because the safety railings were imprecisely defined and the rules and regulations controlling traffic inside the railings were not understood in the same way.

Détente produced SALT I and the unratified SALT II, but it broke down over Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan. In the West, particularly in Washington, that invasion was deemed to violate the terms of the détente. Both had promised in their various agreements to exercise "restraint" in their worldwide activities as great powers. Did the invasion of Afghanistan and the accompanying buildup in Soviet military power violate the rules of competition implicit though not explicit in détente?

Richard Nixon's détente was much more than just SALT I. It was a broad network of agreements and understandings. The real substance of it was the idea that the United States would put the technology of the West at the disposal of the Soviets, in return for which they would behave as a satisfied and cooperative member of the world community.

One essential feature of détente from the Soviet point of view would be enjoyment of "most-favored-nation" access to the American market. In the euphoria of early détente, the great American corporations would open offices in Moscow and build branch factories all over the Soviet Union. Trade between the two would expand. The Soviets would find their national needs met within a peaceable community of nations.

Vast tomes have been written by both sides in explanation of why things never worked out that way. Each side blames the other. Moscow never got the technological help it expected from the West. The West never saw the Soviets behaving like a satisfied and peaceable member of the world community. It kept on building its military power. It continued, indeed, it speeded up, recruitment of imperial clients.

So what can come out of the meeting in Geneva?

The immediate subject is the possibility of reviving talks about arms control. But the larger context is the possibility of working out new rules to restrain the world-ranging activities of the two superpowers sufficiently to prevent the meeting at Geneva from leading into a resumption of the "cold war."

It is interesting and perhaps even significant that on the eve of the meeting, when a Soviet missile launched from a submarine in the Barents Sea flew over Norwegian territory and landed somewhere in Finland, the Soviets immediately apologized.

The incident could have been a repetition of the U-2 affair, when a high-level American reconnaissance plane was sent into Soviet airspace just as President Eisenhower was heading for Paris and a high-level "big four" meeting at which he hoped to do constructive peacemaking business with Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviets shot down the plane with its pilot, Gary Powers. Gary Powers survived, and talked. He told all, after President Eisenhower had first denied that the plane was on a deliberate reconnaissance flight. The "cover story" was that it had "strayed" from its flight path.

Gary Powers blew the "cover story" out of the water, and the Paris conference with it. Mr. Khrushchev walked out. President Eisenhower left office without the peace achievement he had wanted as a fitting close to his administration.

All concerned have avoided turning the affair of the strayed Soviet missile into a repetition of the U-2 story — which is a step in a constructive direction.